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Feeding Disadvantaged Children, in England, during the Covid-19 Outbreak

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Covid-19 has shone a light on pre-existing social, economic and health inequalities. This report will focus on what has been done to support access to food for children who increasingly rely on free school meals, free school breakfast clubs and holiday clubs as a nutrition safety net. There has been widespread concern about food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis and the UK Government has provided funding to the CVS network to ensure food provision for those classed as 'vulnerable'. Two excellent summaries of the UK response to food insecurity across the UK can be found in a report by Kartik Raj of Human Rights Watch and in a report by Lambie-Mumford and colleagues (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Lambie-Mumford et al., 2020).

In terms of free school meals, on Thursday 12th March, the WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak to be a pandemic and on Friday 20th March 2020, schools across the UK closed their doors to all but the most vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. This resulted in many children who normally receive free schools meals facing the possibility of missing meals or consuming meals of lower overall nutritional quality, potentially negatively impacting dietary habits, future disease risk and educational attainment (Defeyter, Von Hippel, et al., 2020). In parallel to school closures, during the initial stages of 'lockdown' families experienced increased lack of access to affordable food (Dimbleby, 2020), increased household expenses due to children not attending school (JRF & Save The Children, 2020), and a lack of the less expensive staples (e.g. tinned baked beans) due to consumer demand (Brown, 2020). Importantly, families that had little disposal income were not able to stock pile food, nor able to buy the more expensive brands. Furthermore, due to demand, the availability of food reduced in price for quick sale in shops was significantly reduced. Consequently demand for emergency food aid has escalated: the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) has seen a 177% increase in independent food bank use and an 85% increase in the number of children supported with emergency food parcels in May 2020 compared to May 2019 (Independent Food Aid Network, 2020); the UK's largest network of food banks, the Trussell Trust, recorded an 89% increase in April 2020 compared to April 2019 with a 107% rise in the distribution of food parcels to children (Trussell Trust, 2020).

Data on food bank use is considered a poor indicator of food insecurity as emergency food aid tends to be accessed as a last resort and until recently the prevalence of food insecurity has not been routinely collected in the UK (House of Lords, 2020; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015). Based on

extrapolated data from IFAN and Trussell Trust, an estimated 10% of households experienced moderate and severe food insecurity across the UK prior to the Covid-19 outbreak (Food Standards Agency, 2019). Following lockdown, the Food Foundation estimated that by 14th of April food insecurity had quadrupled in the UK (Food Foundation, 2020b). Cumulatively these factors illustrate the fragile financial health of many disadvantaged families and a recent study on coping strategies revealed that during lockdown a quarter of UK adults struggled to access affordable food and almost a quarter of adults with dependent children were eating less to feed their children (Defeyter, Stretesky, et al., 2020).

School closures for all children, apart from the children of key workers and those classed as vulnerable, prompted the UK Government to provide alternative arrangements for children normally in receipt of free school meals (FSM) both during the term-time as well as the Easter and May half-term holidays. On 31st March, the DfE announced a scheme to replace FSM provision. The initial guidance was for schools, in England, to replace FSM with food parcels but a voucher scheme delivered by Edenred was also developed in parallel. Through the voucher scheme, schools ordered eCode vouchers which parents could exchange for eGift cards and spend in certain supermarkets.

For families in England, the financial value of vouchers was set at £15 per week for every child eligible for benefits-related free school meals, not currently attending school, and advice was published on how these vouchers should be spent. However, a large number of schools and parents experienced significant issues in accessing free school meal vouchers, including issues with schools registering on the Edenred site, delays in accessing the Edenred help line, the website crashing, confusion over whether alternative FSM provision costs would be reimbursed by the DfE, delays in parents receiving vouchers and anecdotal reports of shops refusing to accept vouchers. (House of Commons, 2020). Initially eGift cards were restricted for use in certain supermarkets, including Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, Morrison, Waitrose and Marks & Spencer. This presented disadvantaged families with difficulties in terms of access to stores and the scheme was expanded to include, Aldi, Iceland, Company Shop Group, The Food Warehouse Stores and McColl's by the end of June. Indeed, the Food Foundation estimates that, as a consequence of failings in the scheme, 200,000 children have had to skip meals (Food Foundation, 2020c). Furthermore, failings in this scheme resulted in high levels of stress and anxiety for teachers, parents, children and supermarkets (House of Commons, 2020). Likewise, IFAN's food bank managers and volunteers have been reporting significant need among families during lockdown and, in particular, in relation to the issue of inaccessibility of free school meal vouchers online, access issues around the temporary extension of

eligibility to the scheme to include children of groups who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and ineligibility for free school meals as a result of parents having recently having applied for Universal Credit. It should be noted that since lockdown restrictions started to ease, the DfE announced in July 2020 a temporary, further extension of free school meal eligibility to include some children of NRPF groups whilst coronavirus impacts schools (DfE, 2020a).

Originally, the DfE stated the free school voucher scheme would close at the end of the school summer term and only committed to the originally planned £9M funding for holiday provision, across a limited number of areas, despite academics, parliamentarians, and food campaigners having campaigned for year-round access to food and activities (Defeyter et al., 2019; Forsey, 2017; Graham, 2017). However, the threat of a legal action led by Sustain, an imminent Conservative MP rebellion and a high profile campaign led by Marcus Rashford resulted in the English government making a commitment to provide free school meal vouchers and funding for holiday provision until schools reopen in September 2020 (DfE, 2020b).

Generally, there is emerging evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has resulted in changes to dietary intake (Hubbab, 2020). Since lockdown, the Hubbub report (2020) found that 43% of respondents are worried about the extra cost of providing food for their household, and 31% of respondents state that they are not eating as much fresh fruit and vegetables. Little is known about what children, who are in receipt of meal vouchers, are actually eating and whether their diet has changed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. We speculate that the experiences of parents and families will vary widely, according to geographic location, household income, dietary behaviour, breadth and depth of interventions from governments, the local response to Covid-19 and the type of intervention programmes families are able to access, and available community assets and pre-existing infrastructure. A recent study by Defeyter and Mann (2020) reports that during the lockdown disadvantaged children are both skipping meals and consuming diets that are poor in terms of nutritional content. This is hardly surprising as it is evident that households with children in the bottom two deciles, earning less than £15,860, would need to spend 42% of income (after housing) to meet the Eatwell Guide costs (Scott et al., 2018). The additional £15 from food vouchers has not enabled households to move out of the risk of children experiencing food insecurity, especially at a time when household income is likely to have suffered. As this study captured the food intake of a sample of children whose parent / carer were able to access the food voucher scheme, these findings suggest that children of a parent / carer unable to access the voucher scheme could be at risk of severe food insecurity. Furthermore, the findings from this study support

findings from Food Foundation's YouGov survey (May 2020) that households with children eligible for free school meal provision are at increased risk of food insecurity and access to healthy food, educational, cultural and social activities during school term time and during the school holidays (Food Foundation, 2020a). There are a number of holiday programmes, funded by the DfE, charities and local councils, currently operating across England to support children's dietary intake and participation in physical and cultural activities. However, DfE funding for the Holiday Activity and Food programme only provides funding for approximately 50,000 children, is restricted to ten geographic areas and hence, does not currently provide universal access to food and activities and falls considerably short of supporting the 1.3 million children eligible for free school meals in England (DfE, 2019).

Other charities have adopted complimentary approaches to ensuring disadvantaged children have access to healthy food including the provision of cooked meals delivered as takeaways, citizen's supermarkets and holiday programmes. For example Family Gateway, a charity that operates in some of the most deprived wards in the North East of England, conducted a parent survey (n=30) and found that, over 60% of families consumed diets that mainly comprised of ultra-processed foods and takeaways, with few fresh vegetables or fruits (P. Wonders, personal communication, 11 August 2020). The charity decided to provide three home-cooked, balanced nutritious meals, every week to disadvantaged families. To support longer term outcomes, Family Gateway is offering parents bespoke nutrition awareness and home-based cooking training through a Roving Chef programme and community café activities.

While such initiatives are laudable in response to COVID-19 and the food poverty crisis that preceded the pandemic, it is apparent that the UK government needs to implement systems and policies that ensure the nutritional needs of all children are universally met to avoid further increasing the risk of health and educational inequalities for years to come. Ensuring children's right to affordable, healthy food all year round, primarily through addressing gaps in the social security net and inadequate wages, food systems and structures would build resilience within communities and the health of the next generation.

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